

Replacing Mr. Or Mrs. Wrong

DATING AFTER A DIVORCE CAN BE DIFFICULT;
MEETING NEW PEOPLE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE

WRITTEN BY KENYA McCULLUM

THE ARBITRATION HAS ENDED and you're left with half a car payment, half a mortgage, half a pension and even have to split weekends with the dog. Is this half a life? Maybe.

In December 2005, Psychological Science published a study that offers a bleak forecast to people who have gone through a divorce: Study author Richard E. Lucas, a professor at Michigan State University, found that divorced people also can expect a long-term diminished level of happiness. According to Lucas, based on his observation of 817 subjects, "Divorce does seem to cause a permanent decline in the levels of happiness." Although the subjects' levels of happiness did rise over time, Lucas found that they never returned to where they were prior to divorce.

For men, it is even worse. A study conducted by the University of California-Riverside found that divorced men are twice as likely to commit suicide than married men and four times more likely than women.

Despite the fate that the Lucas study predicts, life after divorce doesn't have to be unhappy. In fact, you can find true happiness after a divorce, but Francine Davis, a Massachusetts-based psychologist and Harvard professor, who, in addition to counseling patients on issues related to divorce, once worked with a matchmaking company, emphasizes that you have to work for it.

"I think that people can be happy at any point in their life," said Davis. "There's no question that divorce is a trauma; in fact, it's one of the most traumatic things that can happen to someone. The question is, 'What have these people done or not done to address the trauma of what happened in the marriage and what went wrong?' Then they need to make a commitment to wanting a happy life, to feel that they deserve to be happy in spite of what happened."

Now that sounds a lot more optimistic. But how can someone who is back in the dating pool wade through the waters so they can swim and not sink?

Although there is a lingering stigma that online dating is merely a technological sophistication of its predecessor, classified ads, more and more people are looking for love in online places. This can be a prudent place for the recently divorced whose last dating strategy may have included a campus bar and a decision to cut the next morning's anthropology class.

"We help single people connect with other single people for romantic relationships and the hope is that we create more opportunities to meet people than you would have in the course of your day-to-day life," said www.match.com spokesperson Kristin Kelly. "It's really a way to help you meet people you wouldn't otherwise meet."

But caveat emptor: Dating sites can also exponentially increase your possibility of meeting those with bad intentions. Match has standards designed to make the experience as safe as possible — the company doesn't allow subscribers to include their personal information in their profiles, has created a double-blind e-mail system that allows subscribers to contact each other in an initially anonymous fashion, and has a team of employees who focus their efforts on ridding the site of fraud and abuses.

But these safeguards can only protect users while they're actually online. The intention of www.match.com's service is for people to meet in person at some point and Kelly offers some tips to make the experience of meeting a potential mate from the site both pleasurable and safe. One of the things she suggested is to meet your date in a public, neutral place for a relatively short period of time, since the first meeting is designed to be a chemistry check. She also pointed out that people should have realistic expectations when they go on these first dates.





"We try and remind people that it's important to have realistic expectations," said Kelly. "Dating is a process. We want you to have fun and you're going to be meeting new people, but you could meet lots of people before you find someone who really interests you."

Another area that has taken abuse from the media is round robin dating, which is essentially going head first into the dating scene stew.

If you've seen movies like "Hitch" or "The 40-Year-Old Virgin," you're already familiar with the concept more commonly known as "speed dating," which is actually the trademark name of a company dedicated to putting Jewish singles together. Created by Los Angeles Rabbi Yaacov Deyo, these events allow singles to meet several other

singles and then determine interest in them based on spending a short period of time with each — at SpeedDating events, it's seven minutes per date.

Allyson Rubenstein, SpeedDating's events director, said this avenue is a great way to meet potential mates in a fun, laid-back atmosphere.

"You get seven first dates out of the way in an hour and a half," said Rubenstein. "If it's a great seven minutes, then you wish the seven minutes would go on longer. But if the date's awful, and you know that within the first two or three minutes, then you know that you're only sitting with the person for seven minutes."

Tom Jaffee agreed that round robin dating is a good idea, so much so that his own company offers its customers one minute more than SpeedDating does. He also believes that the events offered by his company, 8minuteDating, can be a useful means for divorced people to ease their way back into the dating scene.

"What's really appealing about 8minuteDating for the divorced crowd is that they've been out of the dating scene for a long time in most cases," said Jaffe. "They've not dated like that for quite some time, so they feel rusty and anxious about it. You can look at 8minuteDating as sort of a way to ease yourself back into that."

"If people go in expecting to fall in love with every person they talk to, they're probably going to be disappointed. If you do meet one or two people you'd like to see again, that's a pretty good use of your time and money."

Although dating can be a natural part of the post-divorce healing process, Davis noted that jumping into it immediately may not be the best idea and likened it to "desperately trying to put a happy ending on a sad story."

"You can put a ribbon on a bag of garbage and it's not a present," said Davis. "Dating can be part of the healing process, but you have to be honest about where you're at. I don't think you have to go hide up in a monastery either because healing really doesn't happen that way."

But how does healing really happen? Davis said it starts with you believing that you deserve to be in a happy relationship, no matter how bitter your divorce may have been. "Try to be in a place where you can feel good enough about yourself to know that you deserve to have a good relationship," she said. "If you can be in a place where you're basically happy with yourself and your life and a great

relationship would be a happy addition to it, you're in the best place to move forward. Everything you can do to get yourself to that place, do it and then try to enjoy the process. Treat it as a process."

Once you've gotten to the place where you know that you can, and should, have a happy and healthy relationship, start meeting new people. Experiment. Shop around. Learn about yourself through your interactions with others. And when you find that special someone, remember that all of your happiness and needs cannot rest on his or her shoulders.

"I really do think you have to commit to being a happy person," said Davis. "You have to commit to saying: 'I want to have a happy life and I'm going to put the elements in place to be happy. I want to spend my time doing things that are more joyful than miserable.' The first step in getting happy is to be able to be honest about how you really feel. Trying to deny the sadness is actually a recipe for unhappiness." ■

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